

## Leo, the Lost Lion

“Can somebody come get this lion? It’s eatin’ up my freezer.” The panicky voice on the other end of the telephone came from a small rancher from a small town in southern Arizona. The call was to the Phoenix Humane Society.

It seems that a mud-show circus had a breakdown on the highway and had limped into his place asking for help. Being a native Southwesterner, the rancher graciously extended his hospitality to the whole circus. For two days they took hay from his barn, ate his beans, used his sugar, and when they drove off, it was with his gasoline. As an assurance that they would be back to repay his generosity, the circus left behind a lion named Leo in a battered traveling box. He was a lean, old, and hungry beast.

To pacify Leo until he was reclaimed, the rancher tossed him chunks of meat from his freezer. In short order the lion devoured all the man’s beef and started on a deer from the previous hunting season. It began to dawn on

the rancher that he had been had. The circus was never going to return with money for his beans, gas, hay, or sugar, and they never had intended to collect Leo.

A ravenous lion in a three-by-three by eight-foot box can be a considerable problem; still, the rancher felt he had an asset worth untold thousands. He simply would sell his prize. He called the Phoenix Zoo and I happened to receive the call. “No, sorry,” I said, “we wouldn’t be interested. No, I don’t know where you could sell a lion.” (That was before the lion-park concept took off, creating a temporary demand for lions.) “Well, if you did find a buyer, it wouldn’t be worth more than \$100.” I heard a groan, followed by a pause. “No, we couldn’t even accept the lion for free. Sorry.”

The Phoenix Zoo was only one year old. Construction plans called for large moated enclosures for the big cats, but only the tiger compound was completed by opening day. The zoological society had run out of capital and the lion’s side was left half-finished. We needed \$10,000 before we could entertain the idea of

acquiring lions. Events in life, however, do not always follow a logical sequence.

The next day, after I talked with the rancher, the local Humane Society called. They had rescued an abandoned circus lion that was in dire need of a home. Could we assist them? Since the director of the Humane Society was also on the zoo board, and in essence my boss, I accepted the animal with *mucho gusto*.

We did have a circus wagon-like cage. It had been built before there was a zoo—for use in parades and shopping centers in promoting the proposed zoo. It was not meant to hold animals for more than a few hours at a time, but it was like a stadium compared with the box the lion had lived in for who knows how long. So much for logic in acquiring animals.

Now, Leo wasn't an ordinary lion. Besides being lost and much too skinny, he was also potentially the most beautiful lion I've ever seen once he was cleaned up. His long mane was as black as an African night and extended to his flank in a fringe along both sides of his belly. A wild lion contending with thorns and brambles would never have an opportunity to grow such

tresses, and few captive ones have the capacity to do so. He looked every inch as if he had been sculpted to lie at the base of a Queen Victoria statue.

Leo had another gift, not immediately manifest: he could roar the socks right off your feet. When he got fattened up a bit and contented with life, his roar could shrivel plums to prunes. Flies would vibrate right out of the air. He left every lion within thirty miles know of his presence—if there were any to heed his call.

I lived in the zoo at the time with my family. Even before actually hearing Leo roar, you could feel that he was gearing up. The air got heavy with lion; the windows shuddered in their frames. Then it crashed like waves in a heavy surf, engulfing everything, ending in heavy “Huh, Huhs” like a battery running down.

We were expecting guests for dinner one evening. The night watchman met them at the gate and directed them to our home. Midway across the central plaza our friends were assaulted in the dark by one of Leo’s roars. The lights in our window were their only beacon,

and they ran, leaping park benches like impalas. They hit the porch at full speed and fell inside the door in a dead panic, landing in a heap on the floor. My wife greeted them with quiet aplomb, “Welcome, glad you could drop in.”

Along with accepting Leo, the zoological society and zoo staff accepted the challenge of completing the lion exhibit. Ten thousand dollars in those days was a lot of money. All of our resources—money and people— were exhausted just from opening the zoo and struggling through the first year of operation. It was a staggering challenge, but we had Leo to remind us that it had to be met. And he reminded us day and night, from the parade wagon.

It was a great story for the media. A radio station took up the banner. A fast-talking, loose-jointed disk jockey, popular with the young people, stepped forward with a ray of hope. I’ll call him “Ron.” Even after all these years he’ll probably appreciate the anonymity. Ron said he would raise the money from kids, and devised an attention-getting ploy to pique their interest.

The parade wagon had been built with a steel mesh partition in the middle so that two animals could be displayed when it was used for promotion. Ron pledged to remain locked in one half of the cage with Leo in the other and not leave it until the money was raised. He would broadcast from there and would invite his audience to come to the zoo every evening and dance to his music in exchange for a contribution to the "Save Leo the Lion" fund drive. Professional zoo principles took a temporary vacation.

So, into the cage Ron went with cot, table, recorded music, telephone, a screen, behind which was a port-a-potty, and all the necessary radio equipment. The door was locked behind him and the crusade was underway. Although Leo's space was decreased by half, the lion seemed to enjoy the commotion and watched the moving in with great interest. Ron soon found that living with a lion, especially a male and one as loud as Leo, was going to be much more trying than he expected.

The public response was tremendous. Regular zoo attendance soared in the day and

young people poured into the zoo at night. Everybody was talking about “Ron in the Lion’s Den.” Donations started coming in, most especially from the young people. We had half the money needed in just the first few nights. Then the flow of donations gradually trickled away. Some said that teenagers had given all they had. Others said it had become a test of endurance: people wanted to see just how long Ron could last.

I have to admit I was curious about that myself. Living conditions in that cage were better for Leo than for Ron. Maybe it would be better to say Leo left a lot to be desired as a roommate. It may not be common knowledge, but male lions scent-mark their territory. Think of a male housecat, and multiply the amount a few hundred times. They also have a penchant for using their rearward-pointed squirt guns for their own perverse amusement. Little did we realize that when Ron took up residence in the neighborhood that Leo would consider him a fitting target.

For his part, Ron was not amused. A yellow tinge soon came over him, his clothes,

his music, the table, chair, cot—everything. Young people came to stare, forgetting even to dance. Ron's girlfriend was seen no longer hanging on the guardrail with a look of profound admiration, cheering on her champion. A dismal fog came to hang over the whole scene like smog over Los Angeles. To his credit Ron bravely carried on. The radio station still loved it; ratings were at their highest. And Leo thought he was back in the circus.

The situation grew steadily desperate for Ron. He was seen staring for long periods of time through the holes in his records. Outside the cage, his mother took to sitting in a rocker through the hours with him. She would sweep up, chat with visitors and knit. But most of the time she 'tsk-tsked' at her son and shook her head. He had several thousands of dollars yet to be raised. This situation might have continued on for months or even years if something didn't change the course of events.

One day we received an anonymous gift covering the balance of the funds needed to finish the lion exhibit—a new home for Leo.

There was a great celebration even as we speculated as to who it was that made the final contribution to end Ron's vigil. Silent, benumbed, bleary-eyed Ron came out into the fresh air and was led off for a shower. The table, bed and chair, the records and sound equipment ultimately ended up a tax write-off.

It was rumored that the money actually came from Ron, that he had taken out a loan against his future salary to bail himself out of Leo's field of operation. I don't know... but, I always thought it was Ron's mother; her anguish might easily been more than a mother could stand.

The lion exhibit was completed shortly after Ron and company moved out. For Leo it was a quiet period—until two lionesses arrived. Then everything changed.

